THE TEACHING
OF MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES
IN OUR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

The subject which I propose to discuss in these lectures can certainly not be likened to a smooth and flower-strewn path. If it is not exactly beset with thorns, it may yet appear to outsiders to be stony, dull, and probably devoid of those beautiful vistas which those who unwarily climb the upward path have a reasonable hope of beholding in the end. Moreover my lectures must of necessity be somewhat technical, and the limited time at my disposal strictly forbids me to enter some of the by-paths from the main road, which often afford no small amount of amusement beside material for very serious reflection. One of these digressions would be a short sketch of the early days of modern language teaching, a discussion of the old quaint ‘babees bookes’ or ‘bookes of Curtesy’ which sometimes combined teaching of modern languages with teaching of good manners’. Another digression would be a discussion of the results frequently obtained by the

present system of modern language teaching in some of our Secondary Schools. It has been my lot for many years to make from time to time a careful study of that very remarkable and ever increasing part of educational literature which is known to the scholastic world by the high-sounding name of 'examination papers.' From the questions asked in these papers and the answers to them one may gather some ideas as to the aims and results of modern language teaching—here I refer especially to the teaching of German and French—in our Secondary Schools, and if I were to tabulate my experiences, the results would in some cases be very curious. In what way, do you think, must a girl have been taught, in what spirit must she have read that great masterpiece of Goethe, his lofty play 'Iphigenie,' when in answer to my question 'Why do we take an interest in the character of Iphigenie?' she candidly writes 'Because Iphigenia is the heroine of the play which we had to get up for this examination'? But I must abstain from telling anecdotes which are none the less interesting for the fact that they are absolutely true.

Again, I can only allude in passing to the history of the 'reform movement' in the teaching of foreign tongues, the leading ideas of which were set forth lucidly and forcibly by Professor Wilhelm Viëtor (of Marburg) in his famous pamphlet: 'Quousque tandem! Der Sprachunterricht muss umkehren.' This revolutionary little treatise was written in this country in 1882, and though not absolutely the first work in which a reform of modern language teaching was advocated, was yet the first which, by virtue of its shortness, terseness, and common sense, produced a great stir among modern language teachers. Since that date very many books and papers have been written pro and contra, in Germany and in other countries,

most of them advocating a more or less radical reform of the old system of teaching in the spirit of the so-called ‘direct,’ ‘analytic,’ or ‘imitative’ method. The ‘New Method,’ or ‘Neuere Richtung,’ has been fully developed in Germany, and its main principles have been deservedly adopted by a small band of energetic modern language teachers in this country¹. I cannot undertake to discuss here even the best books and pamphlets on these new methods. They will be enumerated in a special chapter, and students and teachers should make a point of reading the principal ones.

These lectures are especially intended to be suggestive, and, in my own small way, I hope to kindle your enthusiasm. Instead of discussing many different modern methods², I shall venture to lay before you my own opinions and experiences, together with my reasons for holding the former. I propose to throw out some hints on all the more important points of modern language teaching in schools, and shall take my instances mainly, but not exclusively, from German. On the whole it may be taken that what holds good for German holds good for French, but one important fact should never be lost sight of, viz. that the children beginning German in our schools are, as a rule, considerably older than those beginning French. If French is the first or, at the most, the second foreign language learned, German is usually either the third or the fourth, and is as a rule only taken up in the higher forms of boys’ schools. For this reason the necessary elementary drill cannot be provided by means of the same kind of exercises that will do for very young children. The beginners in German invariably require a better mental pabulum—a fact that has often been overlooked. It is also very unwise to start German immediately, i.e. only one or two terms, after French—one

¹ Their views, experiences and suggestions are recorded in the volumes of *The Modern Language Quarterly* and *Modern Language Teaching*.

² See Miss Mary Brebner’s pamphlet ‘The Method of Teaching Modern Languages in Germany’ (London, 1898), Chapter v.

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language should be allowed to have a fair start before another is begun.

I suppose I may take it for granted that you are all more or less well acquainted with the general methods of teaching, and have some notions as to what can be reasonably expected from school children. I can therefore restrict my observations to the more technical part of the modern language teaching in Secondary Schools and the various questions intimately connected with it.

Some years ago there was a great deal of controversy as to the educational value of modern languages\(^1\)—fortunately that time is now definitely past. People are becoming more and more anxious that modern languages should be taught, and should be taught efficiently by thoroughly well trained teachers. I firmly believe that there is a great chance for good modern language teachers in the immediate future, that great opportunities will before long be given, and that all we have to do in our schools and universities is to prepare ourselves most carefully so as to be ready when the time comes\(^2\). It should not be said of us ΄Aber der grosse Moment findet ein kleines Geschlecht.\(^3\)

The question arises: How should the necessary improvement in the teaching of modern foreign languages be effected? I think it can be brought about if the following five conditions are fulfilled:

1. More time should be allotted to the study of modern languages at school. This is of paramount importance. Our leading public schools should set the example.\(^4\)


2 See my pamphlet ΄Greek and its humanistic alternatives in the Little-Go,\(^7\) Cambridge, 1905.

3 In fixing the times it should be borne in mind that for school-children 6 periods of 40 minutes are more helpful than 4 periods of an hour, and 4 periods of 45 minutes better than 3 periods of an hour.
Conditions for Improvement

(2) This time should be used much more systematically, with special reference to the educational needs of the pupils, and not merely with regard to the requirements of certain examinations. A great deal of harm is done to modern language teaching throughout the country by the conflicting regulations of our host of examinations—even though many of them have done a great deal of good in their time and may still have much to recommend them—and by the fact that many of them are still conducted exclusively by means of printed papers and without any compulsory oral test. This seems to me a fatal mistake. The modern tongues should not be treated like the classical dead languages; a viva voce test should as far as possible be insisted on, in spite of the many practical difficulties of which I am well aware. Written examinations for beginners, especially by outside examiners who are not members of the school staff, should be discouraged.

(3) The classes in which modern languages are taught should be of a manageable size, and should, if possible, not exceed twenty to twenty-five pupils. They should be taught in special rooms, removed from the noise of the streets, and where the acoustic conditions are particularly favourable. Their decoration should, as far as possible, be characteristic of the foreign country. In large schools there should be at least one German and one French class-room containing large wall-maps of the foreign countries, photographs, pictures and picture post-cards of all kinds, portraits or busts of some of

1 In the London University School Examinations an oral test is compulsory.
2 Ed. Gaebler’s school wall-map of Germany, ‘Deutsches Reich, Niederlande, Belgien, Schweiz und deutsch-österreichische Länder, politisch. Bearbeitet und gezeichnet von Ed. Gaebler. Leipzig, Kartographische Verlagsanstalt von Georg Lange,’ deserves to be strongly recommended. Other good political maps of Germany are ‘Bamberg’s Schulwandkarte’ and ‘Kiepert’s Schulwandkarte.'
the great classical authors, collections of coins, flags, a phonograph, etc., and a well supplied library of suitable foreign books and magazines.

(4) From the very beginning none but duly qualified teachers should be entrusted with the teaching of modern languages. The qualifications which I believe to be desirable are discussed in a lecture first given in 1894 before the College of Preceptors, and now reprinted, with some modifications and additions, on pp. 86 sqq. See the Report on Training just published on behalf of a Select Committee of the ‘Modern Language Association’ in ‘Modern Language Teaching.’ I have been told that the qualifications desired in my paper were too high for human capacity to attain, that they represented the ideal rather than the feasible. My answer is that I know from experience that in many cases the ideal has been reached, that I believe that in another twenty-five years it will be realised much more completely, that the training of a modern language teacher does not end with his having taken his University degree, and finally that it is a mistake to put one’s ideal too low. He who forms an educational or any other ideal must set it high; time will show if he was right or if his demands were excessive. I confidently leave you to judge for yourselves.

(5) There should be a more general agreement as to the chief points of method to be adopted and the books to be read in school. To this fifth point I wish to devote special attention. It is the one which is still engrossing the attention of modern language teachers in this country and abroad.

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1 See pages 107 sqq.
2 See the valuable discussions in the Journal of Education, in the School World, and especially in the Modern Quarterly of Language and Literature (since 1897), and in Modern Language Teaching (since 1905) which no serious English teacher of Modern Languages should leave unread. Cp. also the Bibliographical Appendix, pp. 114 sqq.
Methods.

There are in the field many different methods of teaching modern languages—each claims to be the one true method,—all have zealous adherents—and I need hardly tell you that all promise wonderful results—most of them in a remarkably short time too¹. Still it seems to me, and my experience as a teacher and examiner confirms my impression—that ‘the true method’ has not as yet been discovered.

It has not been discovered either in England or abroad.

I certainly do not flatter myself that I have discovered it. I doubt if one uniform method applicable in all cases—a universal panacea which nobody can modify with impunity—can ever be devised. I even doubt if this would be desirable. But it is clear that we are just now in a time of transition and experiment, and I think we have arrived at an agreement on several essential points. Many practical and experienced teachers in this country as well as abroad are at present actively working in this field; much that is good has of late been said and written on the subject,—and much, as it seems to me, that is quite worthless, unscientific and impracticable; a universal agreement even on all the principal points of method has not, however, as yet been arrived at. Much more interchange of ideas and experience is required. The chief work is still being done in Germany, Scandinavia, France, and America—England, in spite of a few noteworthy exceptions, has unfortunately till pretty recently lagged behind, but has during the last ten or twelve years made great progress.

Before going into details I should like to caution intending teachers on one or two points:

1. Do not be too confident with regard to certain new methods, especially do not believe too easily in certain ‘practical’ ones which promise to teach many wonderful things

¹ See Canon Bell's paper, mentioned on page 118.
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in a very short time. These short cuts to proficiency are mostly very unsatisfactory, containing one good idea, but carrying it too far to the neglect of everything else. They are as a rule more or less mechanical, of but little scientific, literary, or educational value; they afford a certain routine, but do nothing to form and educate the minds of the pupils. They merely aim at drilling the pupil in the use of a number of commonplace phrases and small everyday chit-chat. But the acquisition of a certain practical, though naturally very limited, command of a modern tongue by means of some series of words and phrases, the knowledge possessed by head-waiters, couriers and interpreters, although it is no doubt sometimes useful, cannot be the chief aim of modern language teaching in our higher schools. A language which has so subtle and elaborate a syntax as French, or a language which is so deeply saturated with poetry as German, cannot and ought not to be studied by older boys and girls after the unconscious fashion of an infant!

(2) Again, method itself, even the best method, however important, is not everything. A very great deal of the success depends on the natural gifts, the previous training, the energy and the experience of the individual teacher. It is well known that the best modern language scholar does not always obtain the best results as a teacher. Consequently the ideal modern language teacher will not only be a well-trained scholar, but in addition something of an artist and of a man of the world. He must have the power of speech, an easy mastery of the foreign idiom, and the gift of drawing out his pupils and of making them speak, one and all, the shy ones no less than the others, at every lesson. He must have,—more I think than any other master,—the great gift of readily imparting his knowledge, of really interesting his pupils in using the foreign idiom and in studying foreign life and thought,

2 See pages 93 sqq.
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and of enabling them not only to speak but to think in the foreign language. I fully agree with the experienced pedagogue, Dr Münch, who at the general meeting of German modern language teachers held at Hamburg in 1896, insisted that "a teacher should have a certain amount of natural eloquence, quickness of perception, and appreciation of foreign character, as well as an interest in all that concerns modern life."

Whatever the method adopted may be, each master will vary it to some extent in accordance with his own individuality and the requirements of different sets of pupils. A good master will continually modify and improve his ways of teaching in the light of his extending study and increasing experience.

Nevertheless, although the possession of a certain, even of a very good, method is not all that is wanted by a young and zealous teacher in order to command success, it would not be right to underestimate its value. On the contrary, it is most important for us to make up our minds as to what seem to be the most satisfactory principles to be generally adopted in modern language teaching.

Happily on a few important points there seems to exist even at the present day an almost general agreement among experts. Let me take these first. They are:

(1) It is necessary that modern language teachers should have a much longer and better training¹ than they have had up to now in the great majority of cases. Their preparation should be at once more scientific and more practical. The improvement of the masters must needs precede the improvement of the children entrusted to their care. The number of

hours modern language masters are expected to teach per week should be reduced to about 18, and should in no case exceed 20. Five hours per day is decidedly too much for any teacher who wishes to obtain good results and to keep in good health.

(2) Modern languages should not be taught in the same way as the ancient tongues. But even with regard to these there have been of late remarkable signs of improvement in books, texts, public utterances of leading scholars, etc. See, among others, W. H. S. Jones, ‘The Teaching of Latin, London, 1905, and Dr Rouse's article on ‘Translation’ in the Classical Review, June, 1908, pp. 105—110. The modern languages are not studied mainly in our schools for the sake of their form, not even exclusively for the beauty and value of their literature, however important, but in teaching modern languages we also aim at teaching in the broadest outline and as far as it is possible with young people the principal features of the life, character and thought of great foreign nations. Modern languages should not only or mainly be studied and taught by means of translation-exercises, by getting up many paragraphs of grammar, remembering rare exceptions and turning over the pages of dictionaries. There should be no lessons more interesting and delightful to children than a modern language lesson given by the right teacher.

(3) And again, modern languages should be much more closely connected with the study of English on the one hand, and with History and Geography on the other. If groups of languages are studied together, those naturally related to each other should be taken by preference. French should be connected with Latin, and German with English. From a purely theoretical point of view it is even desirable that the two foreign tongues should not be taught by the same person, as not many men will possess the power of transforming themselves now into a Frenchman and now into a German with equal ease and success. There are, on the other hand, many advantages